Dr. Amelia Yeomans

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Dr. Amelia Yeomans

When Dr. Amelia Yeomans died in 1913, journalist E. Cora Hind made an audacious suggestion to the people of Winnipeg. She recommended that a lifesized portrait of Dr. Yeomans be placed in city hall, because in her opinion, it was questionable "if any worshipful mayor whose portrait now adorns the walls ever did one tithe as much for the real upbuilding of the city." Hind's assessment of her friend's contribution was based on firsthand knowledge of Yeomans' work as a physician, political activist and social reformer. In many respects, her appraisal was justified. Whether acting as a spokesperson for women's suffrage, an advocate of temperance or a physician ministering to the needs of the poor and oppressed, Amelia Yeomans' struggle for social justice and change left its mark on the history of this province.

Amelia Yeomans was born at Quebec, Lower Canada, on 29 March 1842, the daughter of Peter LeSueur and Barbara Dawson. Amelia gleaned the benefits of a well-educated and highly motivated family. Her father, a native of Belleville, Ontario was employed as a civil servant and in 1882 was one of the three earliest appointees of the new established Board of Civil Service Examiners. Her brother, William Dawson was a notable "man of letters", an essayist, as well as a charter member and later president of the Royal Society of Canada.

In 1860, Amelia married Dr. Augustus A. Yeomans, a medical doctor who practiced near the LeSueur's home town of Belleville. Augustus was later employed as an army surgeon. The Yeomans had two children, Lillian and Charlotte, prior to Augustus' death in 1878.

Amelia did not remarry, but chose instead to join her daughter, Lillian, in the pursuit of a medical career. Mother and daughter became part of a minority movement that was chipping away at the foundations of 'nineteenth century propriety and prejudice'. Women's restricted social role was gradually being transformed, and medicine was one of many professions that was being forced, albeit reluctantly, to recognize the equal capabilities of women.

The first female physician in the United States, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, had graduated from Geneva Medical College, New York in 1849. Thirty years later when Lillian Yeomans began her studies in medicine at Michigan State University, Canadian medical schools were still closed to women. In 1880, the year Amelia joined her daughter in the United States, the first female medical student was enrolled at a Canadian college. Miss Augusta Stowe, the daughter of Dr. Emily Howard Jennings Stowe, graduated from Victoria College and its affiliate, the Toronto School of Medicine in 1883, becoming the first woman to obtain a medical degree in Canada.

Dr. Emily Stowe and her colleague, Dr. Jennie Trout were largely responsible for the changes made within the Canadian medical profession on behalf of women. When Amelia Yeomans graduated from Michigan State in 1883, two Canadian medical colleges, specifically for women, were established. On 1 October 1883 the Woman's Medical College in Toronto was inaugurated with the elder Stowe as its president, and on 2 October a Woman's College in Kingston was opened and headed by Dr. Trout.

A Medical Practice in Winnipeg

Amelia Yeomans' daughter Lillian graduated in 1882, and in September of that year began her profession in Winnipeg. Specializing in "Midwifery and the Diseases of Women and Children", Lillian epitomized, at least to one reporter of the *Free Press*, the progressivism of Canada's booming 'Chicago of the West'. "Winnipeg," he proudly announced, "does not propose to be behind any other place in any respect, and now it has a lady physician, and one, we believe worthy of the place." The reporter must have been doubly impressed when Dr. Amelia Yeomans arrived in Winnipeg later in 1883 to become the city's second female doctor. Charlotte, Amelia's second daughter, also made a career in medicine, but as a nurse. When her education was completed in 1890 she moved to Winnipeg to live with the family.

Lillian received her medical licence from Manitoba's College of Physicians and Surgeons on 20 September 1882. Her mother did not sit for the licencing examinations until 23 February 1885, two years after arriving in Winnipeg. Legally, Amelia could not practice, although she would have been able to work under her daughter's supervision. The reasons for the delay are unclear, but may have been similar to those which had prevented Dr. Emily Stowe from obtaining the legal right to practice a decade earlier. Stowe, an adamant suffragist, refused to sit for the examinations partly because of the reactionary hostility of licencing boards to female physicians and partly as a symbolic gesture of defiance to a profession and society that rejected the idea of female equality. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Yeomans' position was analogous during the 1880s, her decision to wait two years before obtaining a licence may have been linked to her later commitment to the suffrage movement.

Winnipeg in the 1880s was a city which had just experienced a period of tremendous growth. Between 1870 and 1880 it had been transformed from a small fur trading and agricultural town into a bustling frontier metropolis. With the benefits of rapid growth came many social ills. Overcrowding in the city's north end, poverty, unemployment, prostitution and inadequate sewage, housing and medical facilities were only a few of the problems plaguing the new provincial capital.

During this period, female physicians were generally limited to the treatment of women and children. Amelia's strong Anglican upbringing and her Christian conscience would not allow her to ignore the suffering and broader social problems evident in Winnipeg. She began to venture into the city's poorer sections, toured factories, prisons and overcrowded slums to treat the deprived and dispossessed and to expose their condition to the rest of society. E. Cora Hind sometimes accompanied Yeomans on these expeditions and the articles that described what she witnessed occasionally appeared in local papers.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

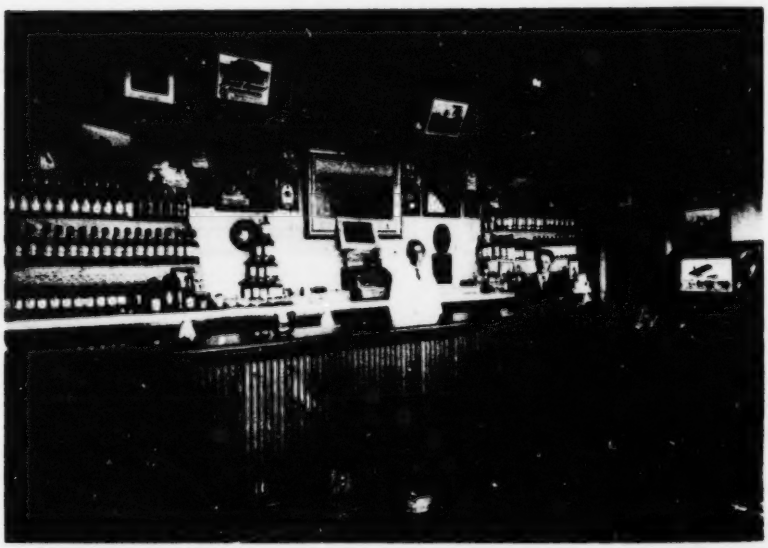
A view of Winnipeg's foreign quarter (c. 1909) where Amelia Yeomans laboured to improve the living conditions and health standards of the city's poorer citizens.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Improving social attitudes toward immigrant families such as the one depicted here (Higgins Avenue, Winnipeg c. 1907) was one of Dr. Yeomans' many concerns.

The practice of "social medicine" provided Amelia with the ammunition she needed to press for reform, and her reputation grew as she became involved in various campaigns for city improvement. She spoke out against the conditions in prisons and in clothing factories where women worked in dimly lit, poorly ventilated quarters for low wages. She also counselled better treatment of non-English immigrants and campaigned to improve the quality and quantity of housing for the poor. Yeomans recruited a number of politicians, clergymen and leaders of the business community to the reform cause, but not all of her activities endeared her to the hearts of Winnipeg's upright citizens. Her campaign to stamp out prostitution, which involved detailed explanations on the dangers of venereal disease, offended their Victorian sensibilities. Despite criticism, Yeomans was respected and welcomed in many areas of the city. When a prisoner at a local jail was facing death, it was Dr. Amelia Yeomans whom he asked to be present.

It soon became evident to Amelia that social reform and the amelioration of society could be more effectively achieved with the prohibition of alcohol. The bars that lined Winnipeg's main streets became a symbol for the social evils against which she laboured. Alcohol was frequently the cause of unemployment, wife and child abuse, crime and the desertion of social and family responsibilities. To Yeomans and others, temperance reform was viewed as the key to broader social change. Without the prohibition of alcohol, other social reforms would not be forthcoming.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Temperance activists struggled to have saloons and bars like this one closed in an effort to protect society from the "evils" of alcohol.

The Women's Christian Temperance Movement

In 1883, Mrs. Letitia Youmans, leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, toured the cities of Brandon, Portage la Prairie and Winnipeg, bringing the temperance message to the women of Manitoba. It was a movement which combined an optimistic belief in progress and development, with a critique of the problems created by social change and growth. In order to legitimize their activities, the largely Anglo-Saxon middle class women involved defined the movement as one of "organized mother love". Members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), they claimed, would not adopt the methods of "the street, the court, the mart or office" but would maintain "the manner of the home". As such, the WCTU was portrayed merely as an extension of women's "historic" social role and not as a radical departure from the past.

Dr. Yeomans became a committed member of the WCTU. She served as a provincial president from 1896-97 and delivered numerous lectures throughout Manitoba. Her genial character and intellectual capabilities commanded widespread respect and admiration. In 1898 the *Free Press* reported that "Dr. Yeomans' abilities are so well known, it is hardly necessary to say her paper was appreciated." Another reporter, from the *Calgary Herald*, once commented that to listen to Dr. Yeomans was "to arouse the intellectual ambition, to enrich the mind and enlighten the life...". It is difficult to say what impressed the Calgary reporter most: "the excellent matter contained in the address, or the genial, kindly and benevolent force of the speaker."

Yeomans' temperance activities immersed her in a struggle for "God's work". The Bible stated that women would bruise the head of the serpent and the serpent today, she asserted, was "the liquor traffic". The "Women's Century" had dawned because this great task had been accepted. She argued that to further this progressive work, women had to throw off the historical shackles that bound them in unnatural solitude. "Christ, when on earth never gave any example to the men to keep the women silent, for many women followed and helped Christ while on earth." To help in God's work, she concluded, all realms of society had to be opened to women, including the political. This meant that women had to receive the vote.

The enfranchisement of women was not a popular concept in the late 1890s. The advocates of political equality had not only to convince an intransigent male population, but an apathetic and at times openly hostile female population. Women's resistance to suffrage may have been borne out of fears created by years of economic and emotional dependency, although these were rarely if ever expressed. The fear most frequently alluded to by those opposed to suffrage was the disruptive influence which women's political involvement would have on society's most sacred unit — the family.

Anti-suffrage arguments ran the gamut from descriptions of the physical and mental inferiority of women to their inability to participate in national defence. Women were either too busy at home, too preoccupied with child rearing, too lazy or too flighty to actually use the vote even if it were given to them. The most powerful argument summoned by those opposed to votes for women, however, was the one which claimed that enfranchisement would "unsex and degrade women,

destroy domestic harmony and lead to a decline in the birthrate". Political equality would be the undoing of femininity, maternalism and the sanctity of the family. Men would cease to venerate and respect woman, and her traditional role in society would be altered beyond recognition.

The WCTU, which was based on a belief in the need to extend rather than alter women's traditional roles, was faced with a dilemma. If women won the vote then temperance might be more rapidly achieved. If the anti-suffragists were right, and political equality led to the disruption of the family and the female's role as wife and mother, then even greater social problems might result.

The dilemma was solved in 1890-91 when Manitoba's WCTU endorsed woman's right to vote. The union's president assured her constituents that support for suffrage was not a condition of membership nor was the WCTU now "a sort of women's rights association". Winning the vote was just one way of furthering the temperance cause. Members were urged to make use of the municipal franchise granted to the province's female property owners in 1887 and to petition for school suffrage.

The Campaign for Woman Suffrage

In 1893 the WCTU took their campaign for the enfranchisement of women one step further. On 9 February 1893 they staged a mock parliament at Winnipeg's Bijou Theatre to debate the pros and cons of that all-important issue, "the ballot for women". The event was organized by Dr. Blakely, with Amelia Yeomans acting as Premier. The debate favoured the suffragists.

Dr. Yeomans opened the session with a fiery speech. The position of women, she explained, was a peculiar and trying one. Her responsibilities were those of a mature adult, but her social and political powers were those of a child. A woman was "a rational, independent organism endowed by the Creator with certain natural rights which no one may infringe without wrongdoing". Wrongs had been perpetrated and these had to be righted. Women, at home and in the workplace, had no say in the laws which affected their lives and were powerless in the hands of their oppressors. Yeomans argued that for the sake of both justice and expediency this had to be altered; women had to be given the vote.

Dr. Yeomans was very specific that the beneficial results would far outweigh any potential problems. Women were the most adamant protectors of community morals, purity and righteousness and would use their votes accordingly. Participation in the political process would also enhance their authoritative influence over their children and inspire greater respect in husbands, sons and daughters. Granting the vote to women would not cause the disintegration of the family but a strengthening of its position and would ensure the "best progress of the commonwealth".

The mock parliament demonstrated the growing maturity of the suffrage movement and yielded positive results, at least in the short term. Less than a month after the event, the Manitoba legislature heard a resolution urging the extension of the franchise to women. A vote was taken and the speaker declared the resolution carried, but when votes were called in the record reversed the judgement 28 to

11. The principal of women's suffrage had been defeated.

The WCTU annual meeting in 1893 was dubbed the "franchise convention", and when it ended the membership was urged to dedicate their unceasing efforts to the suffrage cause. The principle of suffrage was upheld but active support waned. Over the next two years WCTU membership began to diminish.

On 22 February 1894, the first woman franchise measure was introduced in the Manitoba legislature. Hopeful of the outcome, Winnipeg's suffragists marched to the galleries the next day to hear the order for the second reading. Much to their surprise, the member presenting the measure announced to the house that it had not yet been printed, an obvious retreat which marked the end of suffrage activity in the legislature for more than a decade.

Dr. Yeomans was not one to casually accept defeat. Although she expressed admiration for the franchise work of the WCTU, she believed that the suffrage cause had now to be presented on its own merits. The enfranchisement of women was no longer simply a means to reform, but an end in itself. Her participation as president of the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association and the support of that organization's founder, Dr. Emily Stowe, inspired her to establish a provincial suffrage association. On 24 November 1894, at the close of a meeting of Winnipeg's WCTU she led a group of women in the formation of the Equal Franchise Association.

Courtesy of Manitoba Archives

The Equal Franchise Association was founded by Dr. Amelia Yeomans, seen here seated on the far right (c. 1900).

The motto of the organization was "Peace on earth, good will to men". Their raison d'être was not to usurp the power of men, but to extend the power and talent of women. The association's objectives were primarily educational: to study political and social economy as well as Christian ethics and their social applicability, to distribute suffrage literature and make appeals to the legislature when necessary. Although an active study and discussion group, few tangible gains were made, and in the early years of the twentieth century the organization folded. The good seeds planted by this early generation of suffragists would lie fallow for a number of years to come.

In 1904 Amelia's youngest daughter Charlotte moved to Calgary and one year later Amelia joined her. In 1906 Lillian also rejoined the family. Neither Mother nor eldest daughter resumed a medical practice: Lillian worked for the post office inspectors department and Amelia, now in semi-retirement, devoted her time to reform work. She remained "very much in the public eye" as an advocate of temperance and suffrage. Vice-president of the Dominion WCTU, as well as honourary president of the Calgary and Ottawa Suffrage Associations, Yeomans laboured incessantly for reform, but at the time of her death on 22 April 1913, neither prohibition nor woman suffrage had been achieved.

The final victory would be won by a new generation of women, but their success was due in part to the pioneering work of individuals like Amelia Yeomans. Dr. Yeomans was a living example of what might be achieved by women, and her work as a physician and social reformer left its mark on the city and province. Her belief in the principle of female equality combined with a commitment to social reform propelled her into the struggle for woman suffrage and helped to pave the way for social change.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Catherine Cleverdon's, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950) and Carlotta Hackers', *The Indomitable Lady Doctors* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin and Co. Ltd., 1974) provide information on Dr. Amelia Yeomans and her work, as well as the movement for women's enfranchisement. A more general text, Aileen S. Kraditor's, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971) provides an overview of the major issues of the day. A history of the medical profession, Dr. R. Mitchell's, *Medicine in Manitoba, The Story of Its Beginnings* (Winnipeg, 1954) also contains references to Dr. Yeomans. The Provincial Archives of Manitoba contains the Women's Christian Temperance Union Papers, although access to this collection is restricted.

Three other publications available through the Historic Resources Branch, "Nellie McClung", "E. Cora Hind" and "Lillian Beynon Thomas" provide information on others involved in the woman suffrage movement in Manitoba.

Credits

The cover photograph of Dr. Amelia Yeomans is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Medical Library.

Dr. Amelia Yeomans 1842-1913

Amelia Yeomans was one of Winnipeg's first women medical practitioners. She led the early crusades both for temperance and women's suffrage.

Born in Lower Canada, she obtained her medical degree at Michigan State University in 1883 and joined her daughter, Dr. Lillian Yeomans, in Winnipeg later that year. Her practice of social medicine among the city's deprived population led her to campaign for much-needed reforms to extend social justice. She served as provincial president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1896-7.

Yeomans' devotion to the temperance movement motivated her to participate with a group of Manitoba women in the formation of the Equal Franchise Association in 1894. Her activities during the 1880s and 90s paved the way for the success of others in the early decades of the twentieth century.

She died in Calgary, Alberta.

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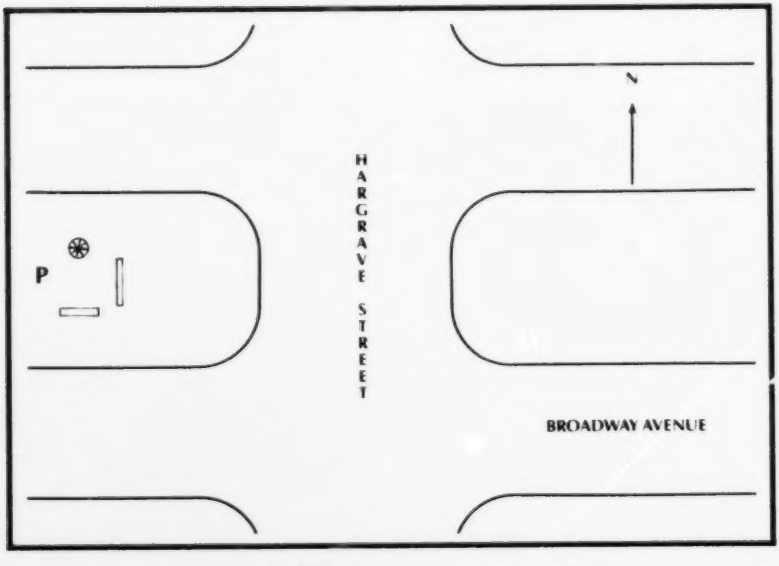

This plaque is located on the Broadway Avenue median at Hargrave Street, in Winnipeg.